

English Heritage's New Study Centre

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English Heritage (The Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission) is the British Government's official adviser on the historic manmade environment. It has in its care some 400 properties ranging from castles and forts to abbeys and country houses. Nearly all aspects of historic building processes can be seen in these properties.

A number of properties provide interpretive displays focussing on the construction and architectural development of the building. In our unroofed sites the structural elements of the building can be seen in a way not revealed elsewhere. In addition, there are two major displays of architectural details—Great Yarmouth, Norfolk, and Ranger's House, London.

The Merchant's House and Row III are typical examples of houses in Great Yarmouth. Built on narrow leases or rows running at right angles to the River York, they have foundations of at least the 18th century. Most were destroyed in World War II, but a selection of the architectural details and fittings were preserved and now form a permanent display. Visitors are shown around by guided tours.

The Architectural Study Centre of English Heritage was opened to the public on 13 March 1993. It is located at Ranger's House on the western edge of Greenwich Park in South East London. It illustrates the development of London building practice from 1660-1914, and is primarily concerned with the decoration and structural elements of domestic housing. The collection dates back to 1903 and owes its origins to the needs of architects in the London County Council for a selection of reference material. Most of it has been salvaged from buildings in course of demolition during the 20th century.

The Centre is housed in the former 19th-century coach house of Ranger's House, which has been specifically

English Heritage has developed a number of publications on the various buildings in its stewardship. For more information about the leaflets (available at no cost) and individual guidebooks (which cost up to 3 pounds), write to:

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adapted re-using items of architectural interest. Ranger's House dates from around 1700 with later 18th- and 19th-century additions and contains examples of features which visitors to the museum can recognize *in situ*.

The exhibition consists of architectural details and fittings such as plasterwork, joinery, metalwork and ceramics, displayed by material in chronological order. Visitors can see the stylistic development of elements (such as plaster cornice decoration) and the methods of construction are explained. The social history aspect of the objects in the museum are also stressed (such as the heavy atmospheric pollution over London caused by the burning of coal in inefficient fires).

Advice is given by the curator of the collection, Treve Rosoman, where it relates to the collections. Demonstration days are held for students in the building trade. In line with many English Heritage properties there is a strong educational aspect to the Centre; teaching aids are available and school parties specially catered for.

Exhibitions are held on the upper floor of the Ranger's House itself, the first of which is devoted to London Wallpapers (1690-1840), and is accompanied by a substantial catalogue. The second in this series of exhibitions and studies will be devoted to English plasterwork.

These two collections are really only part of English Heritage's larger responsibilities, which include some six million objects, many of which are architectural material. The Museums Division was formed in January 1990 to care for the collections, and priority was given to the recruitment of curators, establishment of a nationwide network of stores, and development of a national inventory. Hitherto, most architectural material had remained on site, partly in order that it might be studied in context by archaeologists. The increasing damage by weathering, vandalism, and straight-forward theft, justified the acceleration of archaeological recording and removal to secure storage of many excellent examples of carved masonry.

Once in store, the "disassembled site" is recorded on the inventory, bar-coded, and readily accessible to study groups by appointment. English Heritage aims to have the illustrated national inventory accessible on site at terminals in visitor centres, with a capacity for drawing up comparable examples from the collections nationwide.

Some of our finest "architectural study collections" are those which remain intact and *in situ*. It takes only a slight change in attitude when visiting a "ruin" to recognize not what is lost, but the opportunity to see the naked carcass of a great house, revealing all its structural details. In addi-



Fig. 1. Appuldurcombe House built by the Palladian architect John James c. 1701-13 and still within its ornamental grounds landscaped by 'Capability' Brown, on the Isle of Wight. Photo courtesy English Heritage.

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and all related documentation must be accessioned with the artifacts into the museum collection. This promotes a smoother transition and a relatively short time frame from the excavation to the cataloging work, lessening loss of critical information which occurs when years elapse

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between these two activities. The investment in time and advance planning may challenge a cultural resource manager faced with additional, pressing responsibilities and extremely limited funds, but the park benefits from the long-term preservation of the broad spectrum of cultural resources.

Storage and long-term preservation are always difficult issues for museum collections: they are considerably more difficult for architectural collections because of their bulk and size. Museum quality storage is expensive and, in most institutions and parks, in short supply, making the rationale and criteria for collecting all the more important. Any storage facility should be envisioned as providing active care, not just warehouse space. A storage facility must have curatorial staff to provide preservation and security of artifacts and their documentation, cataloging, monitoring of storage conditions, and access for researchers.

When a team, representing a variety of professions, is involved during the early planning stages of a preservation project, the quality of the overall project is improved. Each team member (and profession) can remind the others of the factors to be considered in conceptualizing the entire project and can lay the groundwork so that each of the various cultural resources can receive a fair evaluation. To try to reconstruct the provenance of an undocumented architectural fragment could be tremendously time consuming (e.g., requiring oral history interviews), but may be warranted in some cases. Setting up standards to be followed for documentation and treatment of fragments prior to the preservation project supports a thorough preservation project.

A primary curatorial value for architectural collections is that, like other primary cultural resources, they can be re-evaluated from many viewpoints by many researchers. New bits of information are revealed and may support future preservation efforts. Architectural elements can also enhance the evidential value of other museum collections. Cultural landscapes, archives, archeological collections, historic furnishings, and historic structures each enhance the significance of the others, forming a complex tapestry of interwoven cultural and natural resources.

For example, an 1844 signed, penciled inscription found on the underside of a wooden board during preservation work on the Longfellow Barn was quickly matched by the preservation carpenters and curatorial staff to original bills in the manuscript collections of the Longfellow National Historic Site in Cambridge, MA. In another instance, prior to preservation work in the mid-1970s, a large bullseye win-

dow was found in the barn with no labels as to its history. In processing the historic photograph collection, images were discovered of the window in place documenting its original location. Other manuscripts helped to place the date of structural changes in that area of the Longfellow House at c. 1910, which in turn helped to date historic plant materials also shown in the pre-1910 photograph. Architectural elements selected for museum collections will be there to supply answers for questions yet unasked.

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tion to great castles, forts, abbeys, and prehistoric sites, English Heritage manages several houses that have only relatively recently lost their internal surface finishes, either through fire or deliberate stripping out to serve the trade. Particularly striking, for example, are Sutton Scarsdale Hall (the dramatic shell of an early 18th-century baroque man-



Fig. 2. Witley Court is a spectacular ruins of an Italianate Victorian mansion near Worcester. Photo courtesy English Heritage.

sion in Derbyshire), Appuldurcombe House (figure 1) and Witley Court (figure 2). Such properties are managed by English Heritage on behalf of the British government because they are of great importance but beyond the means of private individuals, societies or local authorities. Seen as part of a nationwide portfolio, including a network of modern warehouse stores, they effectively constitute England's greatest architectural study collection.

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